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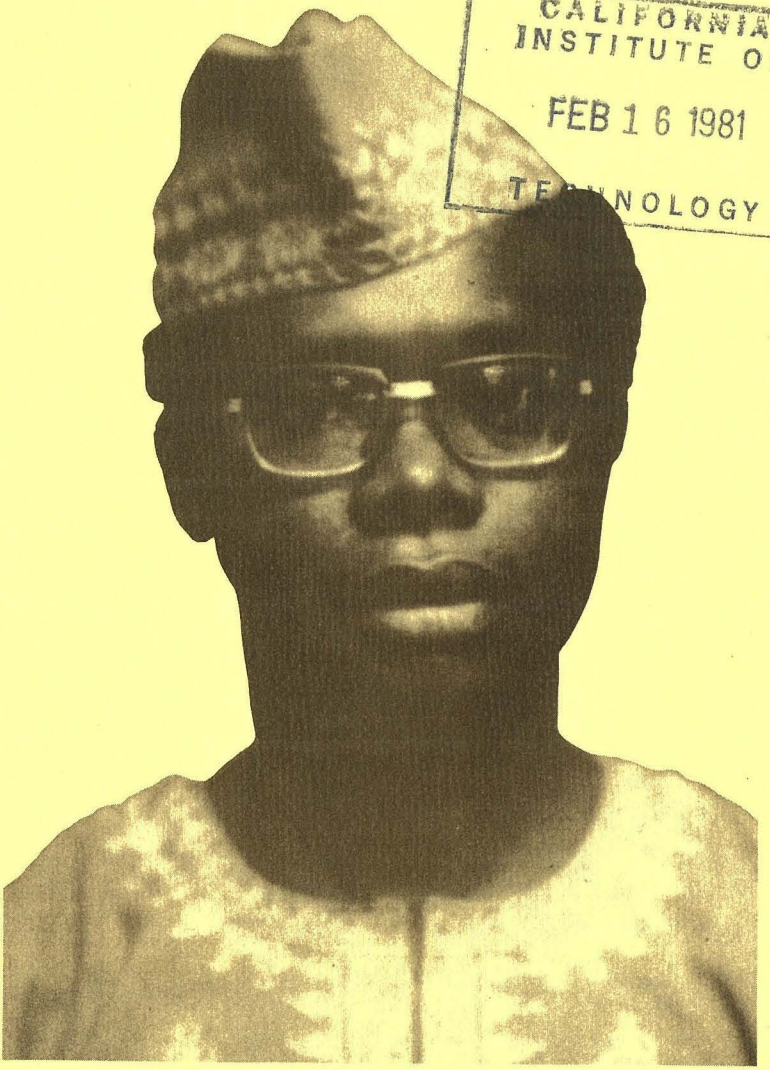

Nationalism and the Nigerian National Theatre

Dr. Joel Adedeji

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Cover Illustration: The author

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Professor Joel Adeyinka Adedeji, Head of the Department of Theatre Arts at the University of Ibadan, originally gave this paper for my Africa Seminar at the California Institute of Technology. In it he traces the role of the theatre in the successive stages of Nigerian nationalism from 1890 onward.

It was said by some at the end of the last century that Nigeria was where the Nigerian railways ran. The political evolution of that elephantine country has been the subject of countless books. But the seminal theme of the author has been little explored before this publication.

Dr. Adedeji was educated at Rose Bruford College in England, where he received a diploma in drama; at New York University (1962-1964), where he received B.S. and M.A. degrees; and at the University of Ibadan, where he received his Ph.D. in 1969. During the later period he was active in a host of organizations. He is currently President of the Nigerian Centre of the International Theatre Institute; President of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Artists; a Member of the Society of Teachers of Speech and Drama in Great Britain; an Executive Member of the UNESCO Theatre Institute in Paris; and a consultant for the UNESCO Division of Cultural Development.

Dr. Adedeji has published many articles and has three books in press: Nigerian Theatre in Perspective (Heinemann); A Tradition of African Theatre (The Third Press); and The Adventures of Obatala (Longman).

Dr. Adedeji is married, has three sons and three daughters, and lives in Ibadan. In 1980 he was a Visiting Professor at the University of California at Los Angeles.

His seminar at Caltech produced a number of questions at the end of his exposition, some of which are included, along with his answers.

Special thanks are due to Wilma Fairchild for editing and to Linda Benjamin for her typing of the manuscript.

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NATIONALISM AND THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL THEATRE

Joel Adedeji

The development of the Nigerian theatre can be categorized within three phases of nationalistic struggles in the country. The first comprises the period 1890-1915 and is titled "Cultural Nationalism," the second comprises the period 1935-1960 and is titled "Political Nationalism," and the third phase takes off from 1960, the period since Nigeria's political independence from British colonialism, and is titled "Regenerative Nationalism?"

An attempt will be made here to place the theatre in the center of these powerful movements which were generated by the devotion, patriotism, or chauvinism of certain individuals or groups and which have had significant consequences for the evolution of the Nigerian state and its stability.

The name Nigeria is derived from the land mass that absorbs the bulk of the River Niger and its tributaries in its tortuous course to its delta in the Atlantic Ocean. The name is a concoction of the British, and the territory is a conglomeration of many different ethnic groups and tribes. In strength, dynamism, and population Nigeria has become the greatest and most significant of all British colonial creations in Africa. The political exercise that brought all this about took place in 1914, the year of the amalgamation of the protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria together with the Colony of Lagos under the sagacious leadership of Lord Frederick Douglas Lugard, the first Governor General.

The emergence of the Nigerian theatre (and here I emphasize the word Nigerian as indicative of form, content, and substance in a qualificatory sense) took place about a decade before the amalgamation of the several territories, but since the history of the theatre is involved with the fortunes of the country in its creation, governance, and independence, it is only expedient

that we examine the Nigerian theatre from a developmental standpoint. After all, the theatre as an institution is an artistic expression of people, a vital means of communication designed to inform, educate, and edify. As a work of art, it has to reflect the sensibility of the people and to project their perception of reality in an entertaining way.

As I have said, Nigeria is a product of British colonialism -- a system of government whose exploitative machinery had to disrupt the people's way of life; first by eliminating all possible signs of threat to the suzerainty and then by imposing measures that ensured complete control of the socioeconomic and political life of the people. A system that attempts to impose on the people's religion touches at the baseline of life and engulfs the soul. The theatre in traditional African society is a ritual celebration which, in spite of its framework, is designed to bring man into a relationship where he experiences a transformation of reality in order to appreciate his own place within life circumstances. The theatre is therefore a cultural phenomenon. The British approach to all this was to evoke the principle of elimination by substitution. Traditional religion was condemned, and therefore so also was traditional theatre, which had evolved from and was still part of what was described by the Christian missionaries as "pagan rites."

BACKGROUND TO NIGERIAN NATIONALISM

By the middle of the nineteenth century, various missionary groups had established spheres of influence in Nigeria. They had begun to operate on the principle that Western "civilization" and "Christianity" hung together as "cause and effect, as root and branch."[1] By adopting this principle, the leaders of the various missionary movements aimed at creating a completely new social order which might be potent enough to combat or subordinate the traditional culture and religion that they had found to be so fundamental and vital to the life and living of the people.

What the missionary groups did first was to create a new class of Nigerian citizens, an "elite group" that they could exploit for the achievement of their proximate objectives. The activities of Sir Thomas F. Buxton's African Civilization Society, established in the 1830s with the expressed purpose of utilizing "Liberated Africans" and blacks from the West Indies in the role of agents, had been popularized in America where a number of blacks in reaction to continuing oppression had begun to agitate for "black nationality" outside the United States as their only hope for freedom. According to Blackett, "informing this 'black nationality' was an evangelical strain, which in language similar to the activities of European missionaries and humanitarians, saw the skilled black American as the bearer of civilization and

Christianity to the benighted native."[2] The movement for "black nationality," however, never reached fulfillment in Africa beyond the idea of its political motives and the principle involved in its advocacy, which the Christian missionaries were quick to seize in their bid to create a new class of citizens. The American missionary Thomas Bowen, whose adventures and missionary activities in the interior of Africa during the middle of the nineteenth century had some crucial effects, made the following strategic statement: "In the history of man there has been no civilization which has not been cemented and sustained in existence by a division of the people into higher, lower and middle classes. We may affirm indeed, that this constant attendant upon human society -- a gradation of classes -- is indispensable to civilization in any form, however low or high."[3]

Subsequent events evidently proved that the activities of the Christian missionaries were not without political motives; to effectively change the people you must change their culture, develop in them a new consciousness through a program of enlightenment that seeks to motivate them toward a new life through the doctrine of Christian salvation. In the course of time, a new "civilized community" had begun to emerge, set apart from the "native" one. By using a dynamic body of emigrants -- mostly repatriates from slavery in Brazil, Cuba, and the West Indies, and in particular those who had been reorientated in Freetown, Sierra Leone -- the missionaries were provided with a vigorous corps of emigrants strongly motivated to be used as agents in the realization of their objectives. This body of repatriates, mainly of Yoruba stock, constituted themselves into the "elite" class, manning key positions in the church and later in commerce and in the colonial administration to help shape the course of events.

In Europe during the medieval period, the theatre was used as an instrument of proselytization by the church. It has since been regarded as a powerful artistic force which could be given incentives or guided support depending on prevailing circumstances, both temporal and spiritual. In Nigeria the various Christian missions did not as a matter of policy press the theatre into service. However, in their professed zeal to foster the arts of Western civilization through a Christian enlightenment program, they started an acculturation process, including theatrical activities, that had far-reaching consequences for the development of the Nigerian theatre.

The Alarinjo Theatre[4] was a popular traditional pastime among the Yoruba. The first accounts of this theatre are contained in the journals of Hugh Clapperton and Richard Lander.[5] Both of these men had journeyed through Yorubaland and had been invited to see a performance by one of the troupes during their stay in Old Oyo, the capital of the Yoruba kingdom. The theatre had developed from the rituals of the Egungun Society, a secret religious organization that was used to interrupt the spread of Christianity among the Yoruba during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The missionaries who could not distinguish between the theatre-group and the cult-group (two separate entities associated with the Egungun Society) set out to eliminate the society and along with it the theatre, which they regarded as a diversion that encouraged the work of the devil. In concept and in form, the Alarinjo Theatre was a variety entertainment, an ensemble of music, dance, and masque-theatricals.

The first theatrical form of entertainment indulged in by the so-called elite or the "Christianized native" was the "concert," modeled after the Victorian music hall or the American vaudeville. The concerts, which were performed in English and later included items in Yoruba, were organized not only to meet social and economic needs but also to satisfy intellectual and spiritual motives. The objectives of the missionaries had begun to be clearer. Although Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, had become the center of the new cultural activities, the performance of concerts had spread to Abeokuta, in the Yoruba hinterland, and later to Ibadan, both centers of the traditional Alarinjo Theatre.

The differing tactics employed by the various denominational bodies of Christian missions in Lagos and other centers of missionary activities in Nigeria created problems and dissensions. The target, of course, was the same -- namely, to win the soul of the native African for Christ. But how was the African to determine which of the denominations was the best church of Christ in Nigeria? Was it the church of the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan or Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, or the American Baptist Church? The Reverend Henry Venn, Honorary Secretary of the Church Missionary Society (1842-1872), was the first to advocate that a new economic order was necessary for the production of the new middle-class of educated Nigerians needed for leadership roles in church, commerce, and politics. He was also the first to popularize the case for the indigenization of the church. According to him:

> Let a native Church be organised as a national institution. . . . As a native Church assumes a national character, it will ultimately supercede the denominational distinctions which are now introduced by foreign missionary societies. . . . Every national church is at liberty to change its ceremonies and adapt itself to the national taste.[6]

In 1874, the Reverend James Johnson was dispatched to Lagos from the headquarters of the Church Missionary Society in Freetown, Sierra Leone, as the most qualified of the new breed of African repatriates to put Venn's theory into practice. Highly regarded for his pioneering work in the movement for Ethiopianism, James Johnson's arrival in Lagos was quite auspicious, both for the history of Nigerian naturalism and the development of the Nigerian theatre.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM, 1890-1915

A wave of nationalism had begun to take a grip on the same class of educated Nigerians created by the Christian missionaries for their own ends. As leaders of thought, they were both the pacesetters in the society and the patrons and promoters of the arts. The most influential of them were members of the Breadfruit Church, in which the Reverend James Johnson was a minister. In 1897, in one of his most eloquent statements, James Johnson had called on the churches in Africa to adapt Christianity to the African environment "in music, architecture and modes of worship." He blamed the superficiality of African Christianity on the missionaries, who by equating "Christianity and European civilization" had endeavored "to grow tropical plants in wintry regions."[7] By 1900, it had become apparent that the doctrine of "Christianity and civilization" had burnt itself out. It had failed to recognize how deeply rooted the people were in their culture. Both the material and spiritual inducements offered to the educated African had caused in him an evident sense of disillusionment. It had also made him quickly recognize the native ideals and cultural values he had been misled to ignore. He was therefore impelled to have recourse to his African cultural roots. Thus began the period of cultural nationalism.

"Cultural nationalism" is the protest movement of the educated Nigerians (denationalized Nigerians of Yoruba stock) who because of their disenchantment with the policy of the European missionaries began to seek ways of satisfying their nationalist aspirations through a program of resurrecting the African past. They began to take pride in their own customs and cultural institutions. Most of them changed their English names to Yoruba names, began to wear Yoruba dress, and to study and write about many aspects of Yoruba philosophy, metaphysics, and mythology. They began to indigenize church services by introducing Yoruba music. The movement for an indigenous African Church had resulted in schism, the emergence of secessionist churches, and the exploitation of the African creative impulse in the use of music and dance in church services.

Beginning in 1897 both J. G. Kuye, organist of the Native Baptist Church, Lagos, founded by Dr. Mojoba Agbebi (who was formerly known as Davie Vincent), and Emmanuel Sowande, organist of the St. Judes Church, Ebute Metta, Lagos, decided to pool their resources "to promote a genuine acceptable Native African Entertainment."[8] The indigenization of the church also created an impetus for the indigenization of the theatre, since the people involved in the one were also artists of the other. Cultural Nationalism had caused not only a considerable intellectual ferment, as was manifested in the published Yoruba literature during the period, but also an artistic orientation based on Yoruba folklore and traditional performance. The upsurge of the so-called "Native Drama" actually began in the African churches of the period. The foundation of what is now

commonly referred to as the "Yoruba Folk Opera" was laid by those who had earlier been influenced by, or had participated in, the productions of European concerts, cantatas, and operettas. A product synthetic in its admixture, the Yoruba opera reveals the extent to which its principal exponents and practitioners utilized existing traditions.

The nationalistic fervor that had punctuated social life had turned the content of the plays away from a rehash of Gilbert and Sullivan, Shakespeare, and other variety entertainment theatricals to materials from Yoruba folklore. A columnist in the Lagos Standard, whose pen-name was James, rendered the following significant comment:

> . . . The spirit which prompts the production of these native plays should in every way be encouraged. Little enough is known about the history, customs, institutions and folklore of his own people by the average Lagos youth, and if by this means instructions can be combined with amusements so much the better.
>
> There is another, and no small recommendation which native plays have in their favour, and that is that the actors can enter into the spirit and interpretation of the various roles better than they can even hope to do in attempting reproductions of such masterpieces of the English drama as Hamlet, Richard II etc. which at best can only be caricatures, presented out here.[9]

By 1904 the new theatre had become one of the important pastimes of the Lagos socialites, and the newspapers of the period were full of praise for the new developments in theatrical art.

By the end of the first decade of this century it was evident that the church and the Christian faith had become inadequate to satisfy the nationalistic aspirations of the growing elite of Nigeria. British imperial rule and economic exploitation could not be isolated from the effects of missionary activities. Promoters of the theatre such as Dr. J. K. Randle, D. O. Obasa, and Herbert Macaulay had resigned their Civil Service appointments because racial tension had developed, as a result of growing nationalistic activities, between the educated elite and the Europeans in the country, especially with respect to competing interests in matters affecting Church and State.

The formation in 1909 of the People's Union, a semi-political organization, was seen as a move to undermine colonial tutelage and influence. Dedicated to the "promotion of the interest of the country in every legitimate way, by upholding what is right, and protesting against what is inimical to the interest of the country,"[10] the organization was a good rallying point for the nationalists.

It will be recalled that the church had opposed the continuation of the production of indigenous entertainments in their chapels and school halls. The situation had aroused a demand for the building of a public hall or a theatre for this purpose. The building of the Glover Memorial Hall by the government was even opposed by the nationalists, who raised funds for the building of their own hall, the Ilupesi Hall, in 1910 in the heart of the city of Lagos and accessible to the "natives." As a consequence of the successes of the theatrical performances of the Lagos Glee Singers (performers of Yoruba Operas), other theatre groups mushroomed, to the extent that the Colonial administration began to see the growing importance and economic significance of the theatre as sufficient to warrant the promulgation of a bill known as "The Theatre and Public Performances Regulation Ordinance, 1912." The purpose of the bill was to regulate theatrical activities through legislation. It was envisaged that the Nigerian Legislative Council would approve the bill, which stipulated that anyone who had to "stage a play or other entertainments of the stage or any part thereof" should obtain a licence or face the penalty of a fine not exceeding £20 for each day of performance.[11]

The reason for the promulgation of the ordinance was hardly understood. But coming at a time when the nationalists had begun to revolt against British imperialism in both church and state matters, the ordinance could be seen as another exploitative attempt to exacerbate a worsening situation. So far as the theatre was concerned, it was a good thing that the bill was never passed into law before the Legislative Council was phased out of existence in 1913.

The outbreak of the World War I in 1914 and the rallying efforts of the British toward "win the war" programs relegated the activities of the nationalists to the background. The war period also saw a shift of interest from local to international affairs, even though the majority of Nigerians did not know what the war was all about or what the political ends in view were. The theatre was involved in staging "patriotic concerts" in aid of the War Relief Fund as an attempt to bolster a dwindling enthusiasm for theatrical performances. By 1915 cultural nationalism had become a spent force.

POLITICAL NATIONALISM: 1935-1960

The nationalistic activities of the thirties were on a different plane. Trade unionism had emerged as an aftermath of the Great Depression, a new breed of politically motivated Nigerians had returned home from study or travel abroad, and a new level of consciousness was apparent in the people's outlook and values. This circumstance was aided by journalism and by the fact that the editors of the Nigerian dailies of the period were themselves the leaders of thought and political direction.

The Nigerian theatre in the thirties was left in the hands of enthusiastic individuals, a new set of young amateurs who had begun a spate of experimental productions in an effort to retrieve the theatre from the doldrums into which it had been thrown since the end of World War I. Disillusionment with the war and the emergence in its wake of a new religious fervor led by the Pentecostal Sects had returned the theatre to the church. The thirties should be described as the period of religious drama composed using native airs. Generally referred to as "Native Air Opera," the performances were church-inspired and were purposefully pursued as an activity aimed at creating a new kind of African spirituality based on the tenets and doctrines of the Aladura Church Movement, which emphasized healings, personal visions, and prophecies. In spite of the influence of A. K. Ajisafe, a theatrically conscious individual who was the only link between the theatre in its earlier period and its new fervor, the man who really established himself as the leader of the theatre of the thirties was A. B. David and his "Roaming Forties," the name by which his theatre company was described. He used the U.N.A. (United Native African) Church as his base.

By the forties the theatre could boast of the leadership of Hubert Ogunde, who at that time was the celebrated organist and composer of sacred songs for the Church of the Land (Aladura), Ebute Metta, Lagos. The emergence of Hubert Ogunde on the theatrical scene brought about a new phase in the development of the Nigerian theatre and its involvement with nationalistic aspirations. By 1945 Ogunde's design had not only revolutionized the content, form, and style of the Yoruba Opera, but had also brought it into full-time professionalism. Ogunde had been impressed by the nationalism of the thirties which saw the birth in 1937 of the Nigerian Youth Movement (N.Y.M.), a political organization dedicated to building a new social order. The organization had drawn into its membership not only middle-class intellectuals but also workers and traders. Early in 1942, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who since his return to Nigeria in 1937 had become the torchbearer of political agitation through the use of his paper, The West African Pilot, formed the Nigerian Reconstruction Group. Others in the group were P. Bolonwu, O. Onojobi, E. Esna, and M. R. Okonodudu. Its object was to conduct research into various aspects of Nigerian national life -- politics, economics, education, and sociology -- with a view to finding solutions to the country's problems.[12] Although the life of the group was short, there is no doubt about its impression on Hubert Ogunde, whose sensitivity to the nationalism of the times had began to show in his own activities. He inaugurated "The African Music Research Party" in November 1944 "to conduct research into native music and dances, stories, folklore and old forms of native entertainments and present the results in form of plays -- operas and revues on the stage."[13] With the transformation of this group into a full-time theatre company in 1946, Ogunde became the first Nigerian to establish a theatrical professional company. What was significant about Ogunde's theatre was its

unalloyed commitment to nationalism and its place in the vanguard of the struggled for political independence.

The theatre's patronage had also yielded the fact of its collaboration with leaders of politics and the importance of educating the masses for political emancipation. Notably, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe's chairmanship of some of Ogunde's shows was an evidence of the new partnership that had been forged between the leaders of the theatre and of politics. Moreover, because of this relationship the theatre received the best coverage in the papers of the times.

Nationalistic activities were directed against British imperialism in an unprecedented manner. The outbreak of World War II and the kind of support demanded by the British had openly exposed British imperialism as a sadistic phenomenon unrelated to the human dignity of the African or of the colonial peoples. The tide of self-government and political independence could no longer be stemmed. In an impressionistic reaction to the nationalists' demand for a return to the "God of Africa," in view of an apparent link of the practice of Christianity with "apartheid" and self-abregation through alienation, Hubert Ogunde presented a Yoruba opera entitled "Africa and God" at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos, in 1944. The play was a dramatic exhibition of Yoruba belief in ancestor worship and of the condition of things in Yorubaland before the advent of the Europeans. Another play, "Worse Than Crime," was presented to the Lagos public in March 1945. In it Ogunde depicted the story of the transatlantic slave traffic and exposed its atrocities, showing that slavery in any shape or form is worse than crime. But the play was an analogy that put colonialism and slavery on the same platform of crime. In June 1945, Nigeria was plunged into a general strike that involved more than a half million workers. The strike projected the industrial phase of the nationalists' reaction to imperialism.[14] Following quickly after the end of World War II was a climate of inflation and poor wages. The workers' agitation fell on the deaf ears of the colonial administration. The strike dragged on for forty-four days and was called off only when an interim award had been announced and a commission had been set up by the colonial government to look into the grievances of the workers.

Hubert Ogunde's reaction to the mood on this occasion was his presentation of an opera entitled "Strike and Hunger" in honor of the meeting of the Nigerian Trade Union Congress. He followed up the success of the Lagos premiere of the show by a countrywide tour in 1946. Pursued and accosted by law enforcement agents in Jos, Northern Nigeria, Ogunde was detained and later charged in court. Apparently the colonial government had not only become apprehensive of the play's political implications, it had also been perturbed by the popularity that had attended Ogunde's theatre from place to place. The charge was that Ogunde had used his theatre to incite the public against the legitimacy of the government's act of governance. He was given a jail sentence with

the option of a fine. The play was banned. The public quickly liquidated the fine through volunteer donations and saw the ban on the Ogunde Theatre as a continuation of the oppressive measures of the colonial government against self-determination and freedom of speech. For Ogunde, the play was his own contribution to the struggle, and according to him the theatre must participate in the march toward freedom and the political independence of Nigeria. Ogunde had thrown his theatre into the vanguard of political education by using the stage for a reflection on the convulsions of the times. In this way, Ogunde had exposed himself as an activist and government had readily identified him as a security risk. In 1946, after a repeat performance of his play "Worse Than Crime," Ogunde's house was searched by the police, after which his passport was seized to prevent him from traveling to Britain, a trip he had publicly announced was planned in pursuance of his artistic goals. Ogunde was undaunted, and released his most vitriolic attack on the colonial government in Nigeria with his opera "Tiger's Empire" (1946).

The granting of independence to India in 1947 had thrown the door wide open for political agitators throughout the British Empire and its colonies to arm themselves not only with rhetoric but also with all legitimate means that could prick the conscience of the British. Unfortunately, the explosions in India had engendered a situation that gave opportunity for divisive forces. The emergence of Pakistan as an Islamic state was a glaring case of self-determinism based on the British policy of "divide and rule." The bogey of "Pakistanization" began to haunt Nigerian nationalism and soon enough it succeeded in becoming the bugbear of tribalism and regionalism in Nigerian politics. The year 1947 must be seen, therefore, as the year of the rupture and the breach. A new constitution had been drafted for Nigeria that was designed to prepare her for self-government and eventual independence. Although the British had ruled Nigeria as one country indivisible, the new constitution had broken the country up into three enclaves, underlining the regional differences -- tribalism, uneven development, education imbalance, and political disorientation. With regionalism as the basis for a new operational thrust, the unity of the country was jeopardized, and so also, for the same reason, was the destiny of the nationalistic struggle. Political leadership was seen in the context of tribe, and political parties soon emerged sharply drawn along tribal lines.

As we have seen, the Nigerian theatre that had emerged was undoubtedly a Yoruba theatre in both its evolution and its aesthetics. It became distinctly so under the "divide and rule" policy that the colonial government had begun to foster in Nigeria. But Yoruba Chief Hubert Ogunde, the father of the Nigerian theatre, did not see himself as a tribal chief. It is also relevant at this point to recall that the Nigerian theatre that had been developed by artists living in the Western Region of Nigeria, the area occupied by the Yoruba, is the product of the British

(missionary) policy of "Christianity" and "civilization." It must also be pointed out that the place of this theatre in the context of Nigerian nationalism was never regarded at any time by other non-Yoruba Nigerians as a projection of Yoruba hegemony or dominance in Nigerian political development. Since the theatre drew its patronage from all and sundry, its popularity as an art movement was without question and so was its impact. It was in this light that one could assess the political role of Ogunde's theatre in the cavalcade of Nigeria's nationalism. Although the nationalist struggle was in disarray from 1949, Ogunde had come out with his opera "Bread and Butter" to reflect his reaction to British atrocity against the coal-miners of the Ira Valley in the then Eastern Region of Nigeria. Ogunde planned to tour the country in 1950 with the play. But he was forbidden from touring the northern parts of the country, as had been his practice with each new play. The British, however, succeeded in using the Northern Region of Nigeria as a pawn in the political chessboard, thereby slowing down the pace of the movement toward independence, which was finally achieved on October 1, 1960.

REGENERATIVE NATIONALISM: SINCE 1960

This phase subsumes a political development crystallized by the rebirth of Nigeria from a colonial concept into the primal reality of an African nation. With the granting of full independence, the destiny of Nigeria now rests on the supreme loyalty of the individuals and the groups that make up the new nation-state. It involves a new consciousness that will harmonize historical experiences and past cultural and political differences for the stability of the nation.

It will be recalled that Nigerian nationalism had been punctured by such divisive forces as tribalism and regionalism. Regionalism, which was nurtured by the British before the granting of independence, had matured with political groupings along tribal lines. Tribal loyalty, tribal affinities, and even tribal felicities had become spices for the savory of political indulgences. Three major political parties arose, reflecting the three large tribes of Nigeria: the Hausa/Fulani of the Northern Peoples Congress, controlling the government of Northern Nigeria; the Ibo of the National Council for Nigerian Citizens, controlling the government of Eastern Nigeria; and the Yoruba of the Action Group of Nigeria, controlling the government of Western Nigeria. For easy communication among the various tribes of Nigeria it was only possible to speak English. The English language therefore has become the one unifying force that exists as Nigeria's heritage from British colonialism. English remained the official language of the new nation -- the medium of instruction at school, the language of law, commerce, and trade, and the language of artistic interactions. Although the political situation did not inhibit the popularity of the Yoruba language theatre that had

gained its own economic viability in the hands of Chief Hubert Ogunde and his followers, it did create and encourage a new theatrical development which gained momentum with independence -- the theatre in the English language.

In the process of nation building the theatre was allowed to reflect the aspirations of the people, participate in the promotion of order, balance, political harmony, and the building of a just and egalitarian society. The fortunes of the theatre had remained the problem and concern of the individual artist and the extent to which he could go to popularize this work and stay alive. There was no government subsidy and therefore direct governmental control of, or interference with, artistic endeavors could not be contemplated. The government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (the name by which the new nation came to be known) had come out in support of a "mixed economy" and had maintained an open-door policy that had created ample opportunities for the rugged individualist to pull himself up by his own bootstraps. The English language theatre had been set to struggle for its own existence on the professional level. Aided by the establishment of the first School of Drama at the University of Ibadan in 1963 for the training of professional theatre artists and educators, the foundation was supposedly laid for the boost of the theatre in English. The English language had acquired an aura of prestige and encouraged the building of an elitism which had the means and resources to support a viable theatre.

The theatre in English has since independence produced a number of Nigerian playwrights and dramatists, of whom the most distinguished is also the most politically conscious. He is Wale Soyinka, African's leading crative artist. Since the production of his play "A Dance of the Forests," written especially for and premiered to mark Nigeria's political independence in 1960, he has become a Colossus that bestrides the African theatre world. "A Dance of the Forests" will go down in the history of Nigerian dramatic literature as the play that embodies not only the paradigm of African theatre but also one that uses folklore to communicate a political statement in which the visionary artist shows his consciousness and nationalistic sensitivity. From Soyinka's creative works since that onslaught it has become apparent that the nationalistic spirit that inspired the independence movement has found a new expressive mode to serve a new cause. In this light Soyinka's deliberate use of the theatre not only to mirror the conscience of the people but also to pave the way for the cultivation of transcendentalism, is seen as a purposeful social and political commitment.

The regenerative process must begin with a social vision. Soyinka preaches change "in new beginnings" and proceeds by piercing the "encrustations of soul-deadening habit to bare the mirror of original nakedness." His theatre of confrontation creates a tortured awareness.[15] Whereas this humanism supports an egalitarian state, his disposition is that of a cultural

nationalist, except that for him the relation between culture and politics must be broadened. The political-cultural dynamic of change must rest on faith in the people's identity. Although Soyinka's ideological orientation is humanistic, his nationalism savors of the Hegelian dialectic -- the collision of two differing but equipotent, dynamic forces, the communal praxis and self-individuation. Two valid ethos. His theatrical method is heuristic and strengthens his faith in the immanence of African aesthetics.

Regenerative nationalism is a process that smacks of the spirit of independence and the movement toward a new vista of life. This must begin with the education and the enlightenment of the masses and the unqualified acceptance of the role of the theatre as a vital institution in the communicative process, to bridge the chasm of transition that lies between the elite and the masses, a chasm created by the forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Soyinka's plays not only reflect the "sociological disorders" in the Nigerian society, they are also "concerned with the fate of man in his environment, the struggle for survival; the cost of survival; the real meaning of progress; the necessity for sacrifice if man is to make any progress; the role of death -- even the necessity for death in man's life."[16] According to Soyinka, the artist should function in the African society not only as "the record of the mores and experience of his society" but also as "the voice of vision in his own time."[17] In the true character of this statement, which brings Soyinka to the same level of consciousness with the traditional African artist, Soyinka's creative works include revues and satirical sketches that serve as the most potent of his theatrical contributions. The successful presentation of "The New Republican" in 1964, followed by "Before The Blackout" in 1965, marked a new thrust. These satirical sketches poked fun at the vagary of Nigerian nationalism, political gerrymandering, corruption and nepotism in high places, and the life and death struggle of political neophytes for a share in the nation's cake. These revues and sketches more than his numerous staged plays have shown Soyinka's direct use of the theatre as a mirror to reflect the "state of the nation," and his readiness to point up the odium of a political process which seems to him to be suffering from a recurrent malaise that needs the urgent attention of the surgeon. These disjunctions in the natural lineal order of political growth and development agitate Soyinka's agile mind and sensitivity to a point where in reaction he manifests himself as a political idealist and activist, in consequence of which he has suffered incarceration at the hands of Nigeria's political octopi, both civilian and military.

The use of the theatre as an instrument for sociopolitical change in Nigeria has received the critical attention of Nigerian politicians, especially those with power. They tend to keep a watchful eye on the theatre artist. It will be recalled that Chief Hubert Ogunde, the doyen of the Nigerian theatre, had to face the brutality of the law even at the hands of the government of

Western Nigeria, his home region. In 1964, as a result of the performance of his opera "Yoruba Ronu" (Yoruba Think), the Ogunde Theatre was banned from operations in Western Nigeria. It was alleged that the play was a deliberate attempt to expose to ridicule those who were privileged by the circumstances of political chaos in the region to assume the reins of government. The play had chronicled allegorically the events that had led to the change of government, and had predicted, dramatically, the downfall of the usurper-government and the return of equilibrium and prosperity. It is ironical that the ban on the Ogunde Theatre was ordered by the same man, the late Chief S. L. Akintola, then Premier of Western Nigeria, whose pen when he was editor of the Nigerian Daily Service in the late forties had vehemently denounced the British Government for its harassment of the Ogunde Theatre. Politics had changed but the artist had not, and the thin line between chauvinism and nationalism could now be discerned. In 1966, the regime was toppled and a military government was set up. The new leaders lifted the ban on the Ogunde Theatre and commanded that the play "Yoruba Ronu" be staged before an invited audience of Nigerian dignitaries and thereafter performed throughout the country.

Ogunde had always used the theatre in an enlightened manner and, like Soyinka, as the record of the mores and the voice of vision. The political chaos into which Nigeria was dumped by the wrangling politicians was also the cesspit from which her cataclysm was made manifest. The resultant Civil War (1967-1970) was a source of great concern for the theatre artist, as it was for everyone. The Ogunde Theatre was out on the bandwagon of the "win the war" effort. His play "Keep Nigeria One" was staged in the best spirit of the war slogan "To Keep Nigeria One Is a Must." Nevertheless, Ogunde is not a political propagandist. He is a visionary artist with a sharp critical outlook. He went round the country with a play that envisioned the collapse of Biafra and the return of the Ibo to the Nigerian fold. He was proved right. In the same spirit of the Ogunde Theatre that saw the need for a biographical sketch to give Herbert Macaulay, the father of Nigerian nationalism, a fitting "in memoriam" in its repertory in 1947, "Muritala" was shown throughout the country in 1976 to commemorate General Muritala Mohammed, the assassinated Nigerian Head of State. It redounds to the credit of the visionary artist that in 1978 both Herbert Macaulay and General Muritala Mohammed were elevated by the military regime to the rank of national heroes.

The readiness with which leaders of state, government, and even the church display their antagonism to the theatre is a demonstration of its potency as a means of communication, especially in the African society where the theatre is deemed to have a ritual essence. The contemporary artist, like his traditional counterpart, is regarded as the spokesman of the gods -- the unseen forces that hold sway in the society. He is endowed with the sixth sense that enables him to comprehend what is and to communicate what is to be. The successful evolution of

the Nigerian nation is never the exclusive prerogative of the politician. The theatre artist has been showing his own supreme loyalty to the cause of nationalism even now as then. And since the regeneration of Nigeria must embrace the divers phases of her development, it must proceed with an awakened consciousness and a clear perception of her political goals toward the attainment of a higher standard of life. For this, the Nigerian theatre bears a responsibility.

FOOTNOTES

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14. Wale Oyemakinde, "The Nigerian General Strike of 1945," Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria, vol. III, no. 4 (June 1975), pp. 693-710.

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16. Eldred Jones, "Wales Soyinka: Critical Approaches," in E. Wright (ed.), The Critical Evaluation of African Literature, (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 64-5.

17. Wale Soyinka, "The Writer in a Modern African State," in The Writer in Modern Africa, (ed.) Per Wästberg (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1968), p. 21.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

1. You have only discussed Yoruba theatre. One might not expect comparable theatre in the Muslim north, but what about Eastern Nigeria?

I have explained in my presentation that the Nigerian theatre was the evolution of the Yoruba theatre. The Yoruba had developed a popular professional theatre as an aspect of their urbanized way of life since the sixteenth century. There are evidences of dramatic rituals in other parts of the country. One can refer to the Bori in pre-Islamic Hausa north and the Egaragwu rituals amongst the Ibo of Eastern Nigeria. These however never developed into theatre, not the same kind of institution that the Yoruba built for it, even before the arrival of the British colonizers.

2. To what extent does the Yoruba theatre you have described in the three periods apply also to Yoruba speakers in Dahomey/Benin?

The contemporary Yoruba theatre, like its traditional Alarinjo Theatre counterpart, is a traveling theatre. Records are available to show that the troupes travel beyond Dahomey/Benin to Ghana and as far afield as the Ivory Coast. Ogunde's first tour of West Africa was in 1946. There are many Yoruba speakers in the various countries of West Africa to make such a venture successful.

3. Nigeria strikes me as, in many ways, one of the most introverted countries in Africa because it is immense and has immense problems. But does any theatre deal with pan-African issues such as the drought in the Sahel or the political situation in Zimbabwe or apartheid in South Africa?

I think you are right. I think it is also true that the theatre must confront its own audience with their immediate problems. In that respect the theatre's communicative process is limited. But the issues of the Sahel, Zimbabwe and apartheid South Africa have received the great concern of the Nigerian Government. Supportive aids are given through appropriate channels.

The theatre in English, however, engages in such issues through production of plays written in English by playwrights from Southern Africa. Such plays, for example, are presented to mark Soweto Day or in aid of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, which has a base in Nigeria.

4. You spoke of growing English-language theatre. How many English-speakers are there, in your judgment, in the various parts of Nigeria and what is the level of the English? Does it not become somewhat pidgin as you move towards the Cameroons?

It must be emphasized that English is the second language of every educated Nigerian. By now about 40 percent of the Nigerian population are in school or out of school. Every Nigerian aspires to speak English, it being the official language of the country. For this reason the number grows daily. But there are degrees of its intelligibility. You mention pidgin. Yes, pidgin English is on the increase as you move across the East towards the Cameroons. It widens the base of English as spoken also by those who do not go to school. What is apparent of course is the emergence of Nigerian English with its own features, characteristics, and vocabulary, perhaps in time with the same strength as American English.

5. How much Yoruba drama is televized and how much is shown and understood outside of the West?

Many of the Yoruba theatre troupes have weekly slots on Western Nigeria television. In fact the Yoruba theatre receives its publicity and promotion through television. Some of the plays are shown on the national television network and are shown throughout the country. The Yorubas are found as residents in many parts of Nigeria. It is for this reason that the Yoruba troupes make successful tours around the country. Besides, Western Nigeria is the most cosmopolitan part of Nigeria. There are therefore more non-Yoruba speakers of the language who enjoy Yoruba drama.

6. Can you give us an example of a Yoruba play that is sufficiently universal in its theme to be transferable to American television or the American stage?

Ulli Beier, the German anthropologist who lived in Oshogbo, Western Nigeria for many years to be made a chief, has translated many of the plays of the Yoruba Theatre into English. The following publications are helpful:

1. Duno Ladipo: Three Nigerian Plays (Longmans), 1967.

2. Obotunde Ijimere: The Imprisonment of Obatala and Other Plays (Heinemann), 1966.

3. Duno Ladipo: Three Yoruba Plays (English adaptations by Ulli Beier) (Ibadan: Mbami Publications), 1964.

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